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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes results from a study concerning the ways in which telecommunications might be used to support school reform initiatives in Chicago, Illinois, particularly of Local School Councils (LSCs) and staff development activities across a sample of 283 schools. Results from the study suggest that telecommunications can be used to enhance and extend the quality and quantity of information and training available to parents and community members serving on LSCs and to teachers and administrators working for the Chicago Public Schools. Five questions emerged from an analysis of the study findings and are discussed in the report: (1) What is telecommunications and how is it being used in other school systems? (2) How can telecommunications serve the needs of LSCs and education professionals in Chicago? (3) What can and should be done immediately? (4) What can and should be one over the long term? and (5) How will telecommunications help the Chicago public schools. Fourteen recommendations include 10 suggestions for what should be done immediately, and four for what should be done in the long term. (DB)

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Telecommunications: Electronic Tools for Chicago School Reform

Report Summary

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Introduction to the Study

Over the past five months, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) conducted a feasibility study of how telecommunications might be used to support school reform initiatives in Chicago, particularly of Local School Councils (LSCs) and staff development activities. This study was carried out in consultation with a number of education stakeholders across the city, including community organizations, LSCs, and education professionals at both local schools and the central office. Numerous written and oral surveys were conducted with these groups, and a survey of telecommunications hardware and its use was made across a sample of 283 schools. The complete results and evaluation of this study are included in the full Technical Report accompanying this Report Summary.

Study Findings

Readers already familiar with Chicago and the course of reform over the past months probably will have encountered many of the conditions summarized in the study's findings:

Local School Councils

- Local School Councils are newly established and in need of information, resources, and support. Many are finding that the community organizations that so strongly supported them with information and training prior to the elections do not have the staff or funding to sustain this support. While some LSCs have found community or university-based support systems, a number have not connected with such resources.

- Most LSCs are turning to Chicago Public Schools (CPS) principals and to the central office at Pershing Road for support to perform the tasks outlined in PA 45-1418. They are looking to education professionals to help them understand and construct a budget; make decisions about curriculum and instruction; interpret the reform legislation; construct school improvement plans; and understand and implement federal and state guidelines.

- The Chicago Public Schools, while successfully mobilizing to hold the elections, has not been able to develop an infrastructure nor a set of procedures for helping its professional staff to support the needs of Local School Councils. There are few mechanisms for supplying LSCs with information; for answering questions and making clarifications; for conducting the 30 hours of training mandated by the legislation; for making announcements; and for advertising meetings and other events. In short, these areas all represent shortfalls in a rapidly changing public school environment that has had to gear up quickly for change.

Staff Development

- PA 45-1418 transfers primary responsibility for staff development from the central office to the local school. As a result, central administrators, building principals, teachers, and other stakeholders are seeking effective strategies to implement this change. The most immediate need of local school personnel is current, concise, pragmatic information to facilitate the design of staff development programs that make sense in light of their school improvement plans.

- There also are longstanding obstacles to effective staff development. The relevance and scheduling of training and sustained support for professional education are both key issues. Frequently, inservice topics are not responsive to the educational needs and realities of teachers and administrators, and when professionals do participate in pertinent training, there is rarely continued school and classroom level assistance to help them implement these effective practices. Furthermore, it is exceedingly difficult to find adequate time for teachers to participate in the initial training as well as in follow-up activities.

Telecommunications Resources

- Systemwide, the Chicago Public Schools has an Electronic Information Exchange System (EIES) that serves all schools and allows local users access to electronic mail, a computer bulletin board, and a wide variety of library resources and references. At present, there is limited awareness of the capabilities of this new system and so the school community has just begun to tap its full potential. The Chicago Public Schools also operates a Bureau of Telecommunications and Broadcasting that includes WBEZ (a public radio station affiliated with National Public Radio) and television studios with limited production capabilities at both the central office and at a small number of high school sites around the city.

- The city of Chicago has a cable TV system, monitored by an Office of Cable Communications, that is anxious to explore ways that cable TV can support education in Chicago. Almost 82% of the Chicago schools are wired for cable reception.

- Local schools typically have two or three TV sets and at least one VCR. However, use of these resources is limited and uneven. In general, schools have access to computers, most of which are kept in small to medium-sized labs for student use. Usually, only one modem is available in a building. For the most part, the networking capacities of the computers are not being used. Schools also have several radios and telephones, but they are used primarily for administrative purposes. Schools are likely to have an intercom, but one intercom in seven is not working. Most buildings have designated someone to coordinate the use of equipment.

- Interviews with both central office and school-based CPS staff indicate that a wide variation exists across the school system in awareness of the potential uses of telecommunications. Furthermore, there is no uniformity in the knowledge of and ability to use currently available telecommunications resources.

Significance of the Study

This report breaks new ground in its presentation of how present central and local school resources at the Chicago Public Schools might be more imaginatively and productively used to service routine, everyday needs and priorities emerging from the decentralization process mandated by school reform legislation in PA 45-1418. Chicago is a large and financially strapped system, undergoing a state of administrative transition and change. Use of its resources, therefore, must first and foremost be efficient, but efficiency must not preclude innovation and vision, especially when that innovation and vision are pointed toward improving learning for Chicago's school children.

Results from this study strongly suggest that telecommunications can be used to enhance and extend the quality and quantity of information and training available to parents and community members serving on LSCs and to teachers and administrators working for the Chicago Public Schools. American society is rapidly entering an age of information in which telecommunication technologies, both at work and at home, are helping us sort through and organize the multitude of facts and figures we confront as we try to make decisions and solve everyday problems. Thus, the most fundamental recommendation of this study is that the Chicago Public Schools begin immediately to enact policies that amplify and strengthen its capability to use present and future telecommunications resources to serve both Local School Councils and the staff development needs of teachers and principals. When these needs are served to the fullest, Chicago's students will become the greatest beneficiaries.

Five key questions have emerged from NCREL's analysis of the study findings and are highlighted in this Report Summary:

I. **What is Telecommunications and How is it Being Used in Other School Systems?**

II. **How Can Telecommunications Serve The Needs Of LSCs And Education Professionals in Chicago?**

III. **What Can and Should Be Done Immediately?**

IV. **What Can and Should Be Done Over the Long Term?**

V. **How Will Telecommunications Help the Chicago Public Schools?**

I. What is Telecommunications and How is it Being Used in Other School Systems?

In this report, a telecommunication system is defined as any system using electronic technology to distribute information to several locations or to communicate among several locations. Telecommunication systems include one-way communication, such as broadcast radio; and multi-way communication, such as electronic bulletin boards. They may involve live, real-time interaction between individuals at two or more sites; or they may allow for interaction whenever it is convenient for the different parties to participate.

Typical Telecommunication Systems

A wide range of school-based telecommunication systems has evolved in this country. This diversity is the result of a number of conditions: differences in local and state educational policies; variations in funding patterns; divergence in educational needs and goals; and rapidly advancing options in telecommunication technologies. Almost every possible combination of technology has been used somewhere by a school district. And as new technologies are developed, additional configurations are tried. In order to make prudent decisions about the type of system that could and should be used to support Chicago's reform effort, school personnel must have a basic understanding of what is possible. Typically, telecommunication systems are distinguished by two principal characteristics: 1) direction of information flow; and 2) type of information provided.

Direction of Information Flow. Telecommunication systems are characterized by whether the dominant flow of information is one-way or two-way. One-way systems, such as radio and broadcast TV, often result in top-down communication styles. Consequently, there can be great uniformity in the services and programs offered through such systems. In contrast, two-way telecommunication systems, such as interactive satellite transmissions, telephones, and computers linked through networks, tend to encourage more bottom-up and lateral communication styles. That is, such systems encourage sensitivity to a wide diversity of interests and needs. In addressing the needs of the Chicago schools, one must determine when uniform information is critical and desirable and when individualized communication is a priority.

Type of Information Provided. Systems also can be characterized by the type of information they provide—that is, whether it is data, sound, or image. Data typically includes written text, perhaps with some graphics or digital still frame information. Sound typically means speech, and image usually includes still and motion video, accompanied by sound. Again, in considering a system for Chicago, one must assure a fit between the needs of the users and the type of information provided.

Criteria for the Use of Telecommunications

With such a wide array of options available, how does the telecommunications shopper make a wise choice? One approach is to establish criteria for a system that matches the needs and priorities of the educational consumer. For this feasibility study, both professional development and local school council concerns have guided the selection of criteria. Only when systems meet the needs and concerns of these users can technology systems be installed and used with positive impact on the schools.

This report, therefore, identifies five broad criteria to be considered when evaluating telecommunication systems for the Chicago schools. Telecommunication systems should be:

1. **Responsive to local concerns**. Does the system support and strengthen local councils and school-based professionals as they implement the mandates of PA 45-1418?

2. **Equitable in providing access to audiences**. Would all groups in all schools potentially have equal access to information resources? Would the system de-emphasize or accentuate resource differences among Chicago communities?

3. **Feasible to install and use**. Is the system easy to install and maintain? Can users operate the system without a substantial amount of instruction?

4. **Capable of providing visual, audio, or character information as appropriate**. Can the system provide the type of information needed to meet the specific communication needs?

5. **Effective in achieving educational outcomes**. Will the system effectively and economically support local councils and school professionals in their effort to improve student achievement?

Current Uses in Other School Districts

Telecommunication networks already are being pioneered with favorable results in school systems across the country. Systems in operation throughout other school districts suggest numerous possibilities for Chicago. These examples of telecommunications networks make a strong and compelling case for the educational potential of using telecommunications in Chicago.

New York City. The Office of Media and Telecommunications has a mission to serve teachers and supervisors, using "the motivating power of media—video, film, radio, photography, and mixed media—to capture the interest of all students, including those for whom the more traditional modes of teaching have not been successful." Among its services is a UHF TV station which broadcasts 15 hours a day, including such unusual programs as a daily live feed from France and telecasts for New York City's Korean community.

Dallas, Texas. How can a school system of some 9,000 teachers located in more than 200 schools meet to discuss a critical educational issue? The Dallas Independent School District solved that quandary by utilizing its cable TV system to link teachers, administrators, and experts for inservice training. A phone bank gave teachers at the individual sites the opportunity to call in questions and comments to the presenters. Altogether, Dallas has five dedicated educational channels, offering instructional programming, staff development, and community service. Families can tune in for programs on nutrition. Kindergarten and early childhood teachers can tune to a daily storytelling hour.

Eagan, Minnesota. Telephones located in classrooms are affording teachers and administrators at a new high school in the Rosemont and Apple Valley districts in Minnesota a more rapid flow of information and greater communication between and among the central office staff and school staff. The districts have constructed a phone system that wires each classroom with phone service so that all teachers have immediate access to information and announcements from administrators, as well as more efficient contact with parents.

St. Paul, Minnesota. The St. Paul Public Schools are operating a restructured school, the "Saturn School of Tomorrow," that uses the best of what is known about technology to promote greater learning and personal growth for each and every student. At this innovative school, learning technology plays a major role in student learning. The school uses microcomputers and video-based instruction to substitute for classroom lectures and many basic skills activities. Each student has a computer and is learning to use this technology to support and enhance learning objectives.

Los Angeles County. Across the state of California, the curriculum reform movement is being supported by the Educational Telecommunications Network (ETN), a satellite network that transmits interactive educational telecasts to school districts. A monthly schedule, akin to an educational TV Guide, offers a variety of programs at varied times and days. The interactive programs both inform and model teaching strategies in these content areas.

Nashville, Tennessee. How do parents know if their child really doesn't have homework tonight? Thanks to TransParent, parents of students at Carter Lawrence School in Nashville can make a single daily phone call and get a message, not only from their child's classroom teacher but also from the principal and P.T.A. as well. Typical teacher messages describe the day's learning activities, homework assignments, and upcoming special events.

Charlottesville, Virginia. Student teachers often report feeling isolated and unsupported during their induction to teaching. Teacher-LINK is helping these teachers in Charlottesville, Virginia, through an electronic mail system. Personal computers and modems allow student teachers to ask experienced classroom teachers and university professors the nuts-and-bolts questions that often determine whether they succeed or surrender.

II. How Can Telecommunications Serve the Needs Of LSCs and Education Professionals in Chicago?

Telecommunications, in and of itself, is neither a goal nor a program. Rather, it is a tool to enable and support the work of local school reformers. In Chicago, reform mandates are creating many new information and training needs and intensifying preexisting ones. Supplying these needs, even in a decentralized school system, still requires some centralized communication mechanisms in order to provide equal access to all professionals, LSCs, community groups, and students. However, current lags in communication have created a gap among the legislative mandates, community expectations, and the ability of school faculties and councils to meet them. Local schools and LSCs are not receiving timely and consistently accurate information; nor are they positioned well to obtain training in how to use the information they do receive. Moreover, schools are isolated from one another, thereby preventing the type of networking that might support them in this time of change.

Useful. Telecommunications can help bridge this gap between the goals of reform and the capabilities of local schools to meet them. Individual school councils have the mandate to design locally relevant educational programs, but it is essential that all have access to the same pool of information and training so they can make informed choices. This standard base of information could serve as a support to local faculties and councils, and give them a starting point to creatively address local issues.

Economical. Telecommunications also offers an economical solution to Chicago's information problems. In recent years the cost of telecommunication technologies has decreased while their availability and versatility have increased. Today, satellite dishes are almost as common as computers. And, although many educators are put off by the start-up costs of implementing electronic communication systems, these costs must be balanced against the expenses involved in more traditional approaches including travel, substitutes, duplication of services, and lost time due to delays in receiving information.

Efficient. Telecommunications is also consistent with and supportive of current efforts to restructure the roles and responsibilities of central office staff. In Chicago, a substantially reduced staff is grappling with how they can modify their roles to serve as a resource and support to school-based professionals and LSCs. Using telecommunication networks, fewer staff members can provide support services to even more people than they did in the past using traditional methods.

Potential Uses of Telecommunications

This report identifies some clear needs and new priorities that telecommunications has the unique ability to address, both for the support of LSCs and for the enhancement of staff development programs at the local level.

For LSCs. Conversations with LSC members reveal that many are largely dependent upon their principal and the Board of Education central office for information. Thus, this study concludes that a high priority for school councils is to develop and support the capability of principals to use electronic avenues (computers and telephones) to access Board of Education information for LSC members.

In addition, because there are so many common areas in which councils lack training, pretaped videos and cable television broadcasts could be used to provide LSC members with reliable, uniform training. These video presentations also could be used to model appropriate decision-making processes and procedures in areas such as lump-sum budgeting and principal evaluation. LSC members are performing these roles and functions for the first time. They, therefore, need and indeed want information about how to execute their responsibilities. Also, many council members speak limited English, and, in fact, some council meetings are conducted in languages other than English. Therefore, these videotapes should be dubbed into other languages.

Although some LSCs are identifying and using local trainers, this study found that a large number of councils may not be aware of all of the training options available to them. Electronic strategies could, therefore, help organize and catalogue training offered by community organizations and institutions of higher education throughout the city. Such a training database would eliminate much of the inconsistency and guesswork that often characterize LSC training now.

For Staff Development. This study also identifies a number of new priorities and needs in staff development. Since so many principals lack detailed information on staff development resources, a database could be established that provides school staffs with the most effective curricular and instructional strategies and materials, as well as with available sources of training in these areas.

In interviews with teachers and principals, this study found that there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with present inservice activities. Both principals and teachers note that there is not enough sustained support for inservice activities. Pretaped videos and cable television broadcasts could be used to address this need. These programs might feature models of exemplary teaching within the Chicago Public Schools and, over cable, the broadcasts could be interactive, thereby providing immediate feedback to viewers. To facilitate further peer coaching and collegial interaction, a communications network could be established via telephone, computer, or video teleconferencing.

In conclusion, for LSCs, this study recommends that the Chicago Public Schools look very carefully at concrete ways to use telecommunications as a support system for these groups that are new to the business of schooling. Like any new business, these councils need access to information, training, and other services to perform their designated tasks, and they need distribution systems to communicate with available resources. Electronic avenues represent an efficient, dependable, and equitable resource for the geographically dispersed and very dissimilar councils. Moreover, telecommunications can be configured in ways that take advantage of the assets of a large district, while maintaining the autonomy of local schools.

Similarly, this study recommends that the Chicago Public Schools expands its present uses of telecommunications to support school-based staff development. If individual schools are to become responsible for staff development, they must have ready access to essential information that will allow them to design programs relevant to local concerns. School staff have a great enough challenge in assuming the responsibility for meeting their own training needs, without being restricted by a lack of information or isolated from others pursuing comparable goals.

III. What Can and Should Be Done Immediately?

Recommendation 1 Create a telecommunications-based policy initiative for the Chicago Public Schools, recommending that individual schools utilize telecommunications as the avenue of greatest economy and efficiency to support the tenets of the reform legislation in Chicago.

Recommendation 2 Begin a public information campaign about how telecommunications can support and enhance Chicago's school reform efforts, beginning with a Telecommunications Fair at which major technology suppliers demonstrate how existing and enhanced technology systems can be configured to offer information and training to LSCs and to sustain local school staff development activities. This Fair would furnish displays and examples of what others are doing and provide workshops with hands-on instruction in the use of telecommunications.

Recommendation 3 Establish a Telecommunications Council of local leaders who are knowledgeable about telecommunications and can influence policy and policymakers at both the city and state level; who can develop strategies for acquiring funding and other necessary systemwide support; and who can build and nurture connections between Chicago's telecommunications activities and similar activities in other cities.

Recommendation 4 Work with the Office of Cable Communications to secure the dedication of one or more cable channels to the Chicago Public Schools. These channels could offer: 1) LSC training; 2) professional development; 3) community outreach; 3) student instruction; and 4) broadcasts of selected national educational programming from services such as PBS, TI-IN, and NETT (National Educational Technology Trust).

Recommendation 5	Develop a plan for sustained training on the role of and strategic use of telecommunication technologies for the rethinking and restructuring of Chicago's schools. Administrators, LSC members, and teachers will learn how these resources can be used to accomplish changing goals in every aspect of schooling.
Recommendation 6	Seek corporate support to create "schools of tomorrow today," schools that demonstrate and model what technology can do to help network and support educational settings. The funding would establish pilot sites across the city to participate in designing, implementing, and evaluating telecommunications systems.
Recommendation 7	Work with local educational agencies to develop corporate and federal funding proposals that would begin to optimize these pilot systems.
Recommendation 8	Extend the two-way use of the Chicago Public Schools' EIES system so that it is interactive, providing for meaningful central office-to-school and school-to-school communication via electronic mail and computer bulletin board. The tremendous potential of EIES should be used so that schools can make requests for specific information from central office staff as well as "talk" to other schools across the city.
Recommendation 9	Create and operate a computer database, from which users can access such items as: 1) information about state and federal guidelines, 2) catalogues of national and local staff development resources, and 3) authorized lists of LSC trainers. A database gives users a measure of control over information and resources that they may not have or cannot acquire with present, non-telecommunications strategies.
Recommendation 10	Procure a Ku-C band satellite dish that would feed directly into the city's cable system and onto channels dedicated to the Chicago Public Schools. This dish would allow the schools to receive national, regional, and local educational programs for student instruction and staff development.

IV. What Can and Should Be Done Over the Long Term?

Recommendation 11

Develop full studio production capabilities at the Chicago Public Schools so that teachers can begin to use this technology to produce videotapes for use in local staff development activities; so that LSCs can begin to have access to tapes that are geared to the tasks they must accomplish; and so that the system might begin to develop informational programs highlighting important Board of Education news and announcements.

Recommendation 12

Begin strategic planning for the use of telecommunications across the state of Illinois. This strategy would connect Chicago with smaller urban centers such as Rockford, Joliet, and Peoria. For every dollar spent on telecommunications in Chicago, smaller urban districts with limited resources would save money and gain access to information and services. Conversely, any efforts made in Peoria or East St. Louis would enhance Chicago's knowledge base and access to resources. Pooling local, regional, and national resources would extend the feasibility of building and maintaining a statewide telecommunications infrastructure that had numerous applications across all areas of schooling.

Recommendation 13

Develop the capacity to offer enhanced student instruction via telecommunications to Chicago's schoolchildren. This capacity should build on the strengths of present teaching staff as well as tap the instructional resources of outside telecommunications-based systems. The "best" teachers and the most effective programs could be offered to students all across the city. This system would represent one of the most equitable "choice" programs in the country.

Recommendation 14

Establish a library of resources and materials for all categories of telecommunications programming—i.e., support of LSCs, staff development, student instruction. This library would provide a hub within each school where students can receive video instruction, teachers and administrators can receive professional development, citizens and educators can receive standardized information updates.

V. How Will Telecommunications Help the Chicago Public Schools?

Study Outcomes

Outlining the benefits of using telecommunications as part of school reform in Chicago has been the principal focus of this study. There have been a number of questions to ask and, always, the answers have been framed through the lens of technology. At its core, this study focuses on supporting the decentralization of a huge urban district. Findings suggest that the real advantage of telecommunications is the standardization and uniformity of delivery it offers, on one hand, and the support and nurturing of local diversity it can sustain, on the other hand.

In Chicago, as in any large urban district—whether centralized or decentralized—individuals need to share a common knowledge base, although they may use that knowledge in a variety of ways. For example, all teachers may need to understand the same set of standards and procedures for a math curriculum implemented citywide. However, individual schools may vary in how they decide to instruct students in the component skills and strategies.

In the past, the only way to disseminate such uniform information in a large urban system was to have a series of workshops presented by one trainer or to have multiple trainers convene workshops simultaneously. School districts have found that the cost of such ventures can be staggering. Hiring substitutes (if they are available) for 200 or more teachers or simply paying transportation can quickly run into many thousands of dollars. Now, however, video or audio conferencing can connect sites across the city so that participants hear the same presentation and take part in one discussion.

This study has found that telecommunications can achieve as much—and more—than traditional communication methods. For example, some might ask: "Can telecommunications overcome the problem of passive inservice training? And can it assure that teachers involved in staff development are going to be sustained and supported over the long term?" The answer is yes—on both counts. First, video training can and must be supplemented with person-to-person outreach, as with a live teleconference that offers presenter/audience dialogue that is facilitated through a telephone bank, or with face-to-face training activities conducted at school sites. Second, video presentations must be integrated directly into sustained training programs that are tied specifically to local school goals. In both cases, the videos represent only one part of a comprehensive training program that should have a number of component parts.

In considering the use of telecommunications, others might ask: "What can telecommunications do to overcome the communication barriers of a multilingual school system?" Telecommunications has online translation capabilities that can be programmed into the system. That is, video programs can be translated into multiple languages. Similarly, special programs can be aired in different languages. And computers can easily provide translated written documents to accommodate non-English speaking users. Moreover, if a cable channel is dedicated to the use of the school system, various communities could begin to develop and produce their own programming, in their own languages.

Finally, one of the most important questions to ask is: "What is the potential of telecommunications for improving student achievement?" Around the country, numerous projects are showing telecommunications' potential for directly and indirectly strengthening the quality of student instruction. Telecommunications makes new and enhanced course options available for all students. No longer must classrooms be defined by concrete walls. Instead, communities of learners throughout the school system can be constructed by matching common needs and interests. Students in any school can have the opportunity to work with the system's best teachers and a wide range of students from throughout the city.

In conclusion, to achieve the goals of the Chicago reform initiative, it is crucial that every local school council member, every principal, and every teacher have access to all available information and to the very best of training resources. From this pool, local schools can then design programs that address the unique needs of their student populations. Furthermore, Chicago's schools cannot continue to operate in isolation from one another. Another key element to successful reform, therefore, is the establishment of communication linkages—between and among the city's education professionals and also between and among the school councils. The bonding of these key education stakeholders around the city will help Chicagoans meet the challenges of their experiment in school reform.

Teachers, administrators, and LSC members from the following schools were instrumental in our work throughout the course of this study.

Profile Schools

Altgeld	Juarez High School
Beidler	Paderewski
Curie High School	Pilsen
DuSable High School	Revere
Dyett	Robeson High School
Ebinger	Sabin
Frazier	Spry
Guggenheim	Stowe
Jefferson	Sullivan High School
Johnson	Terrell

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